FORUM

A Reply to Haber's "Localizing the Global"

FRANCESCO IACONO

Institute of Archaeology, University College London

Alejandro Haber's reading of the World Archaeological Congress in the age of the "Empire" is both timely and stimulating and it offers a lot of breadth for thought for archaeologists.

It is timely because it follows, as the author reminds us in the acknowledgements, the concern over the appropriateness of the sponsorship relationship engaged in by WAC with a multinational mining corporation such as Rio Tinto, which has been accused in the recent past of "grossly unethical conduct" eventually leading to its shares being withdrawn from Norway's national investment scheme[1]. Maintaining a high level of attention over the ethical dangers engendered by the relationship between international business and archaeology is therefore, particularly in this moment, very much needed.

At the same time Haber's paper is thought provoking and of broader general interest as it poses a series of issues and suggestions that deserve to be taken seriously in consideration by any archaeologist and not just by those interested in the ethical dimension of their discipline.

The two-way process of de-territorialization and re-territorialization of local cultural (archaeological) resources highlighted by Haber, which are in our specific case the entanglement between local archaeological practice and the global market, are undoubtedly something that is becoming more and more invasive day after day and that the academic establishment and everyday practitioners alike need to be fully aware of. This same theme has been treated in the past in a somehow milder and more optimistic manner by I. Hodder (2003, mainly in regard to the Çatal Hüyük project), and has in more recent times found renewed critical attention in the volume edited by Y. Hamilakis and P. Duke (2007).

Haber's approach is of course closer to the one expressed by the contributors of this last volume (although he does not fully accomplish the shift from ethics to political-ethics suggested by Hamilakis 2007). The issues addressed in those papers are here dealt with through more theoretical homogeneity, deriving from the use of a general framework based on the "Empire".

There *are,* however, some substantial differences between Haber's point of view and that expressed by Negri and Hardt in their work. Indeed, albeit recognizing the incorporeal and all encompassing nature of the Empire, Haber (like many other archaeologists) endorses a post-colonial[2] and localist standpoint as a way out of this ethical and theoretical impasses.

Post-colonialism however implies an "essentialist", often romanticized (see Callinicos 2007: 316), notion of the local which does not account for the many social facets in which the local

is articulated, taking the concrete risk of reiterating other forms of social injustices (i.e. those embedded in the social context of colonized social realities).

Personally, as a Marxist, I am sceptical regarding the emancipatory potential of localism *per se,* that is non-mediated by social critique. Identitarian discourses can be (and have been, e.g. Davila 1997) easily trapped in the Empire machinery and are subjected to the same forces that threaten official academic "science".

Emancipating archaeological theory and ethics from the colonial/post-colonial dichotomy means discussing as Negri and Hardt (2000: 45) suggest the *production of locality* and making sense of it as a negotiated social process. To this extent Haber's suggestion to uncritically extend "the recognition of political rights over cultural heritage" to any (no better specified) "descendant local community," although at a first sight appealing, seems to be problematic (if not even harmful). At a merely practical level, by-passing the nation state in the decision making process relative to these issues is not likely to facilitate the relationship between archaeologists and the authority, making any action *de facto* impossible. This is not to say, however, that archaeologists should entirely accept what the state tell them about local communities, but if they are willing to contest official institutional perspectives they should not do so uncritically. A better solution would be having an international institution such as WAC directly involved (in collaboration with national authorities) in the discussion and negotiation of individual claims.

The post-colonial standpoint expressed by Haber is also at the core of two other main issues which he raises and with which I profoundly disagree, namely the criticism of the study of social complexity in archaeology as "epistemic coloniality" and the will to challenge "the idea of [the existence of] *one* version of history" (my emphasis). In order to avoid falling back into worn-out discussions on epistemology, I would like only to put in a few words in defence of this supposed "colonial epistemic violence".

Starting from the point regarding the existence of one version of history, as a critical realist, I consider asserting unequivocally a basic kernel of agreed historical reconstruction (which of course has always to be open to continuous re-discussion) a, if not *the,* fundamental aim of archaeology. Using the issues discussed in the paper as an example it is possible to note that soil overexploitation/pollution is a real phenomenon which not only occurs today as a result of intensive mining activity, but has also occurred in different forms in the past, severely affecting the material conditions of life of many people[3]. An epistemic position that put in question these basic facts, in the past as well as in the present, would undoubtedly weaken the cause of those who are critical of unscrupulous activity of mining corporations today.

Concerning the study of social complexity, my claim is that this topic is not an inherently colonial one although admittedly it has been often phrased in a lexicon that is indeed colonial. Putting jargon aside however, with a long-term perspective it is possible to observe that the very intellectual roots of IUPPS (International Union of Pre- and Proto-Historic Sciences) and later of WAC can be traced back to the radiocarbon revolution and to the beginning of a truly "world archaeology" as we understand it today, in which for the first time it has been possible to compare social dynamics and the emergence of social complexity in geographically far away contexts. This has had, as it is fairly well known, enormous consequences in terms of challenging long established views of unilineal social development, which have profoundly undermined European colonial identity.

More than epistemic, in my opinion, the problem that archaeology is to face in the time of the "Empire" is fundamentally social, and primarily requires an effort toward enlarging the social base of access to higher education and academia, particularly in low-income countries. Since from its earliest days WAC's policies have always been, and still are (as it can be seen for instance from the "Archaeologists without borders" project[4]), sensitive to the topic of education, my hope is that in the future there will be an increase of effort in this direction. Only this can inevitably produce a genuine democratization of the discipline and, in time, a gradual modification of research agendas with a consequent a paradigm shift (Kuhn 1963). This of course requires that individual archaeologists willing to pursue the cause of social justice move beyond the specialized debate and become involved as citizens and intellectuals in a political arena which is at times broad (or indeed global), and at others as small as the communities they are engaged with, making their voices heard by the general public in the same way that Peter Ucko did with WAC in 1986.

Notes

[1] See http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2008/sep/10/riotinto.mining, http://www.ethicalcorp.com/content.asp?ContentID=2335 and http://www.waronwant.org/attachments/Fanning%20the%20Flames.pdf (pp. 24-26). In February of 2009 Rio Tinto also funded another major conference held at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, focusing on archaeo-metallurgy outside of Europe, (http://www.ironsmelting.net/WIC2009/index.php).

[2] The word "colonial" and derivative terms are used 34 times in the text.

[3] An example taken from prehistoric Italy is the collapse of the so-called Terramare societies on the Po plain as a consequence of soil overexploitation towards the end of Italian Bronze Age (see Bernabo Brea et al. 1997).

[4] See http://www.worldarchaeologicalcongress.org/site/borders.php

References

Bernabò Brea, M, A Cardarelli, and **M Cremaschi** (eds) 1997 *Le Terremare. La più antica civilta Padana*. Electa, Milan.

Callinicos, A 2007 *Social Theory: A Historical Introduction*. Polity Press, Cambridge.

Davila, A 1997 *Sponsored Identities*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia.

Hamilakis, Y 2007 From Ethics to Politics, in Hamilakis, Y and P Duke (eds) *Archaeology and Capitalism: From Ethics to Politics*. Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, pp. 15-40.

Hamilakis, Y and **P Duke** (eds) 2007 *Archaeology and Capitalism: From Ethics to Politics*. Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek.

Hodder, I 2003 *Archaeology Beyond Dialogue*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.

Kuhn, T 1963 (1996) *The Structures of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd edition. University of Chicago Press, London and Chicago.